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ABSTRACT

Although social scientists are often adjured to become more "scientific," they might well remember a phenomenon described by Arthur Lovejoy as "metaphysical pathos" or the set of sentiments with which every theory is associated and which are congruent with the mood or deep lying sentiment of its adherents. Examples from the past include the Social Darwinism which dominated American thinking during the nineteenth century; the iron law of wages, that the income of the masses could not rise above a minimum level necessary for existence; the premise of natural inferiority which throve in anthropology and ethnology during the period of imperialism; and the various accounts of Reconstruction in the United States. The concept of a culture of poverty put forward in recent times falls into the same trap. Social scientists have a special responsibility to understand the implications of their work; to act on that understanding; and to detect bias in the thrust of their investigations. (Author/JH)

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"THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF THE SOCIAL SCIENTIST"

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It is frequently asserted that social science must become more "scientific." That is, it must concentrate its efforts on the development of concepts, hypotheses, and theories according to the precepts of the scientific method. It must attempt to discover those laws of human affairs (governing individual or group behavior) which will enable the accurate explanation and prediction of social events. Only by eschewing intuition or subjective judgment, it is argued, can progress be made toward the establishment of social theories as reliable as those which have permitted the physical sciences to advance so rapidly. One not only can, but must, separate facts from values and thus guarantee the objectivity essential to the task.

While no thinking person would deny that the scientific method can and does have valuable application to the examination of social problems, we cannot afford to ignore either its limitations or its dangers - particularly the danger of accepting as objective evidence what may well be the product of unstated or even unconscious cultural bias. Some years ago, historian Arthur Lovejoy described a phenomenon which he called "metaphysical pathos" - the set of sentiments with which every theory is associated, but which those subscribing to the theory can only dimly sense. Lovejoy warned that a commitment to a theory may be made because the theory "is congruent with the mood or deep lying sentiments of its adherents, rather than merely because it has been cerebrally inspected and found valid."

I think that if we recall some examples from both the recent and not-so-recent past we will discover the accuracy of Lovejoy's perception.

It should hardly be necessary to remind this audience of the impact and enormous influence of Social Darwinism - that strange mixture of philosophy and biology which dominated so much of American thinking during the nineteenth century, an era of the self-made man, of expansion, colonialism - and slavery. Its key phrases - struggle for existence, natural selection, and survival of the fittest - were well suited to serve as the foundation of arguments for unrestrained competition, laissez faire, racial determinism, and acceptance of various social problems as the necessary price for general (and inevitable) evolutionary progress. William Graham Sumner was,of course. the key proponent of Social Darwinism - and it is difficult to overestimate the pervasive - and persuasive - effects of this teaching on all the scholarly thought of the time.

The beginning of the century saw the birth of the "dismal science" - economics - and almost immediately economic thinking was locked into the so-called iron law of wages, the idea that the income of the masses could not rise above a minimum level necessary for survival. This"most influential and certainly the most despairing dictum in the history of social comment," as John Kenneth Galbraith called it, was not only a basic premise of economic thought, but a most convenient rationale for accepting great inequality. Massive privation, on one hand, and enormous fortunes, on the other, were simply facts of life and, as you know, despite growing criticism and various attempts to make the system operate more equitably, it was not until the 1929 crash and the ensuing depression that economists and politicians were forced to discard their theories and plan for government intervention in the marketplace.

Then again, we might take a look at anthropology and ethnology. In a peri od of imperialism it is hardly surprising that these new sciences began with the premise of the inequality of the various races, and quickly claimed to have discovered scientific documentation for treating some groups as "naturally" inferior. J.C. Nott and George Gliddon announced in their 1854 volume that "nationa and races, like individuals, have each an especial destiny: some are born to rule and others are born to be ruled... No two distinctly-marked races can dwell together on equal terms." It was the heyday of measuring skulls, comparing brain capacities, calculating proportions of various types of blood, and relating climate and temperament. Ashley Montagu is only one of many later scholars who have exposed such efforts for what they were - "myths created to fill psychological needs" - that is, the need to prove that the Negro, in particular, is inherently inferior.

History, although not commonly regarded as a social science, is full of examples of varying or even contradictory interpretations of a given event or period - and a prime example can be found in the various accounts of and shifting attitudes toward Reconstruction. From 1870 on, John Burgess and William Dunning were the most influential spokesmen for an account of Reconstruction which held sway for many years (and still does, in certain circles)--although as early as 1910 W.E.B. DuBois began to argue that it was biassed in the extreme. In his 1935 book, DuBois wrote:

"In order to paint the South as a martyr to inescapable fate, to make the North the magnanimous emancipator, and to ridicule the Negro as the impossible joke in the whole development, we have in fifty years by libel, innuendo and silence so completely misstated and obliterated

the history of the Negro in America and his relation to its work and government that today it is almost unknown." And he continued,

" With a determination unparalleled in science, the mass of American writers have started out so to distort the facts of the greatest period of American history as to prove right wrong and wrong right."

Since then, of course, many historians, including C. Vann Woodward, Carter Woodson, Rayford Logan, James McPherson and John Hope Franklin have joined in exposing the bias of the old view and in presenting both new evidence and new explanations concerning Reconstruction and its aftermath.

In sociology we might perhaps turn to more recent times and note the development of the concept of a culture of poverty. This concept - which is defined as "a self-perpetuating set of values and attitudes which prevents one generation after another from taking advantage of new opportunities and thus escaping from their miserable existence" - was originated by Oscar Lewis in connection with his studies of Mexican peasants. But it has been readily adopted - explicitly and implicitly - by a number of other scholars who find in it a convenient way of explaining the failure of certain groups in America to achieve economic and social progress. The Moynihan report, for instance, was clearly written from this point of view - and Edward Banfield adds to it his own terminology of "extreme present orientedness" and inability to delay gratification.

Finally, let me mention psychology which in World War I intelligence testing claimed to see new evidence of the inherent inferiority of blacks.

Later analyses, of course, showed that geography accounted for wider differences in IQ's than did race - but such findings have not dissuaded psychologists like Arthur Jensen and Richard Herrnstein from pursuing and promoting theories of genetic inferiority.

It should be clear from these brief references to developments in the various social sciences that "metaphysical pathos" is an inescapable factor in the development of hypotheses, the selection of data, and the building of theories in the social sciences. Try as we may, it is all but impossible to escape from the cultural forces which shape us. Eleanor Burke Leacock describes the problem this way:

> Social scientists aim to achieve an objective, detached, and truly scientific attitude toward society...
> Unfortunately, however, the findings of their own sciences constantly affirm the fact that, though they may constantly strive for the goal of objectivity, they should never assume that it can be completely attained. Social scientists are human beings, which means social and cultural beings whose needs, desires, fears and persuasions must impinge upon their work in various ways. By definition "middle-class," their scientific calling does not automatically make them immune to ethnocentrism when looking at members of the lower classes. Since the vast majority of social scientists are white, their attempts to achieve understanding across black-white lines are also subject to the chauvinism embedded in our culture.

Similarly, John Kenneth Galbraith in his 1972 Presidential address to the American Economic Association called attention to the ways in which economists become captives of their own stereotypes - or of the prevailing political tides. Dr. Galbraith concluded his address by saying:

> I do not plead for partisanship in our economics but for neutrality. But let us be clear as to what is neutral. (Current economic theory) is the influential and invaluable ally of those whose exercise of power depends on an acquiescent public. If the state is the executive committee of the great corporation and planning system, it is partly because neoclassical economics is its instrument for neutralizing suspicion that this is so.

This is not to say that we should cease in our efforts to extend our understanding of the nature of social reality. Not at all. But an acknowledgement of our involvement in cultural bias might at least lend some humility to our assertions - and give rise to healthy skepticism about the pronouncements of others, no matter how good their credentials or reputation.

There is more to the problem, however, than simply recognizing and admitting the existence of metaphysical pathos. Even social scientists who abstain from any attempt to influence public policies, who are engaged in "pure research", cannot ignore the unanticipated consequences of their work. Those physical scientists who were engaged in atomic research were confronted with a new responsibility when they began to realize the terrible implications of their work. And similar agonizing problems have faced many other scientists who began to see how their findings might be utilized for the destruction of mankind.

Social scientists may likewise be caught, wittingly or unwittingly, in situations where they can no longer hide behind the cloak of academic freedom or objectivity, but must face their moral responsibility for the consequences of their work. Noam Chomsky, commenting on Richard Herrnstein's Harper's article entitled"I.Q", underlines the importance of the "social function of his conclusions," and laments the "lack of concern over the ways in which these 'scientific investigations' were likely to be used." If, Chomsky argues, a psychologist in Nazi Germany were to undertake studies which would support the Nazi belief in the inferiority of the Jews, his protestations of academic freedom and the right to pursue any form of research would be met with"justifiable contempt."

When the theories of a particular social scientist are met with "extravagant praise" despite their possible bias, Chomsky continues,

> We are not dealing simply with a question of scientific curiosity. Since it is impossible to explain this acclaim on the basis of the substance or force of the argument, it is natural to ask whether the conclusions are so welcome to many commentators that they lose their critical faculties and fail to perceive that certain crucial and quite unsupported assumptions happen to be nothing other than a variant of the prevailing ideology.

In closing, let me say this: my concern about the problem of bias in social science research, and the problem of the unanticipated consequences of that research, is not intended as, and should not be mistaken for, anti-intellectualism. Quite the contrary: there is still so much that we need to know, there are so many promising leads to follow-up. In fact, I have frequently warned, in public and in private, about the dangers of policy planning, program development or decision making in the absence of accurate data or sound theories. But let us recognize and admit our own biases, and those of others, in the selection of what to study, of hypotheses, of which data to analyze and which to ignore. Let us see that appropriate techniques are utilized to eliminate bias wherever possible.

Those in power have always relied on scholars and philosophers to provide a rationale and justification for what they proposed to do. It is clear that the current administration in Washington is running true to form. Drawing on the collective efforts of a number of scholars from various disciplines, the elected leaders of this country are attempting to "prove" that their chosen policies of retrenchment and retreat from social welfare programs have, so to speak, the academic seal of approval.

Social scientists have a special responsibility, then, to understand the implications of their work - and to act on that understanding. They should expect no special immunity from criticism, as my friend and colleague Kenneth Clark recently stated, and certainly they should be accorded no special powers to decide on matters of public policy. In matters of justice and equity, social science data are only one of the considerations to be taken into account. Our most important task, then, may well be to forget about being "value-free" from time to time, and, as men and as citizens, to join our fellow human beings in a renewed examination of those things which are truly valuable.

(This topic is discussed in greater detail in my National Urban Coalition monograph: Stupidity, Sloth and Public Policy: Social Darwinism Rides Again published in May, 1973.